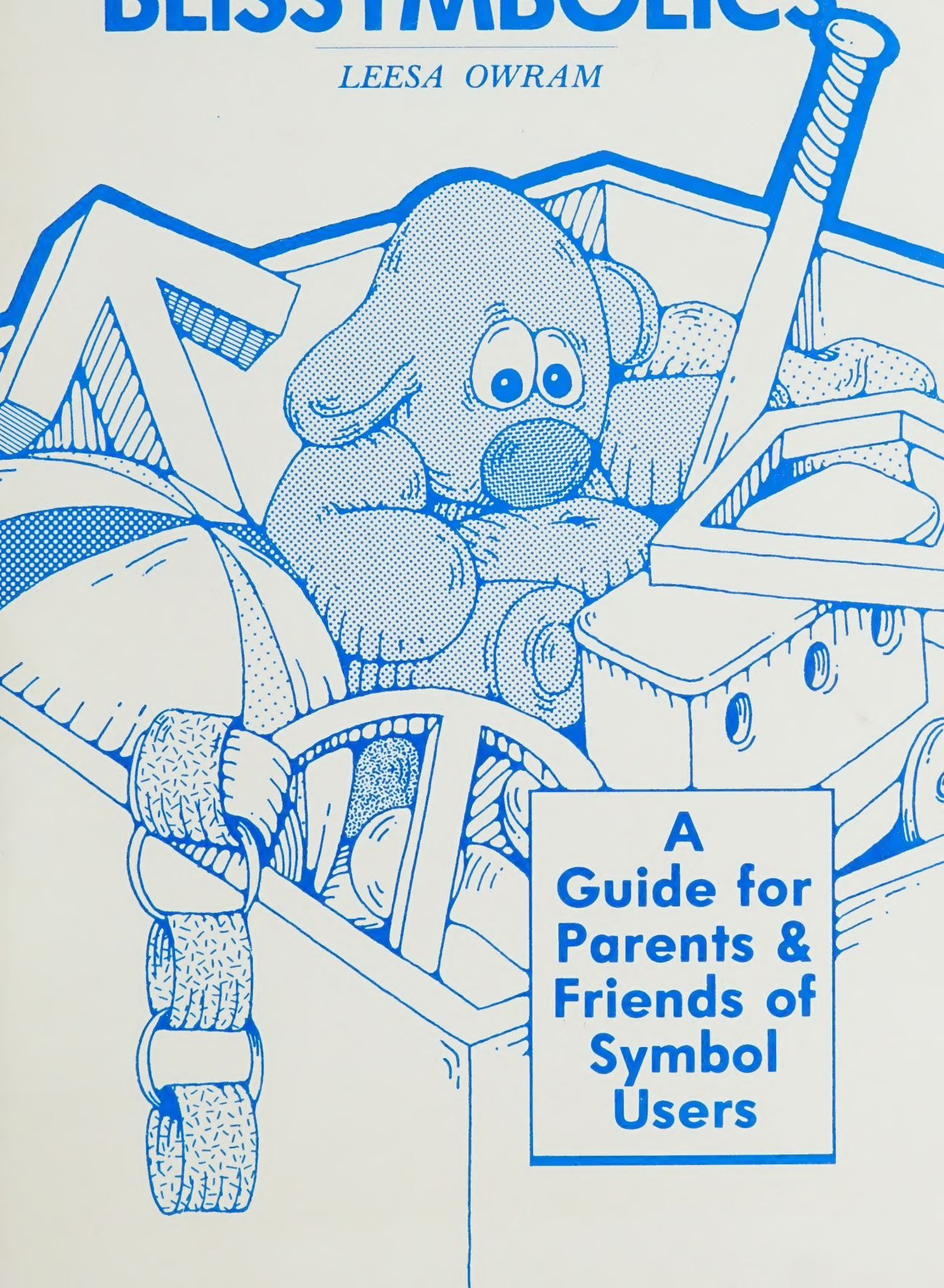


Introducing **BLISSYMBOLICS**

LEESA OWRAM



**A
Guide for
Parents &
Friends of
Symbol
Users**

Introducing
BLISSYMBOLICS

*LEESA OWRAM, D.S.P.A.
Speech/Language Pathologist*

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Users**

Blissymbols used herein derived from
the symbols described in the work,
Semantography, original copyright
© C. K. Bliss 1949.

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® indicates a symbol that differs from the C.K. Blissymbol for this meaning.

The cover illustration contains symbols representing **chair, up, life** and **house**. These are not shown in the usual size or orientation.

Dedicated to the memory of
Mrs. Elsie Spani

PREFACE

I would like to thank those persons who helped me write this manual, especially the readers who offered their insights, suggestions, and encouragement in the early stages; the secretaries who helped prepare the copy for publication; the visual-aids staff who assisted with the photography; the staff at BCI who offered their assistance and guidance before and during publication; and all the children and their families who continue to teach me about symbol communication through my work at the Credit Valley Treatment Centre for Children.

To simplify grammatical structure, the male pronouns or the noun "child" have been used in this book. No sexism or age restrictions are intended by the use of these terms.

Names and events used in Chapter 1 are purely fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is coincidental.



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INTRODUCTION

Communication is a fundamental human need. Talking allows us to share our thoughts and feelings, express our fears, and draw closer to those around us. Most people don't think about how they are able to talk. It is something that just happens. Only when something goes wrong is talking seen as the powerful and precious tool that it is. For the parents and friends who read this manual, talking has taken on a new meaning. Talking is Blissymbolics — a visual graphic system of symbols that allow a child without speech to communicate.

Parents of non-speaking children have sought help from many professionals and hoped that someone would have the therapy programme to help their child talk. For some children, however, speaking is very difficult. They lack the motor control for the finely co-ordinated and overlapping movements that intelligible speech requires. Therapy programmes aimed at speech and articulation development have not been successful and parents may feel frustrated and defeated.

Blissymbolics is a system for those children who are able to learn but cannot speak. Blissymbolics is for parents and friends who want to communicate with children who cannot speak.

Many professionals from many disciplines are helping to improve the system for children around the world. In any new adventure, ideas are plentiful, but time is scarce. As people work to expand and perfect the system for the child there is often too little time for the parents and other interested persons. Parents may not fully understand the system of Blissymbolics. This lack of understanding often causes parents and others to shy away from getting involved, for fear that they may do something wrong. This book is a guide for those people who want to learn and want to help . . . the parents and friends of Blissymbol users.

CHAPTER 1

A Communication Story

Some children have difficulty talking. They want to talk and have lots to say, but the muscles used in talking do not move properly. Their speech is so slurred and distorted that most people do not understand them. This book discusses one method that has helped these children to communicate. The method is called Blissymbolics. It is named for Mr. Charles Bliss, the man who developed the system.

The first chapter follows one family and their son Mark as they discover the Blissymbol system. This story, narrated by Mark's mother, traces the events in Mark's life as he learned to communicate with Blissymbols instead of words.

The Beginning

My husband and I had taken Mark to therapists and doctors since he was six months old. Mark was born with cerebral palsy. Our doctor told us about cerebral palsy when Mark's condition was diagnosed. The information didn't make much sense at first, but as we watched Mark grow we began to notice problems. Mark's movements were so unco-ordinated that even learning to do the simplest things took great effort. It was a long time before he could crawl and still his crawl was different. When I thought how easily his sister had learned to walk and talk, I realized Mark would always have to work much harder.

Mark was still very young when he was assessed by a communication therapist. Although Mark seemed to understand what we said to him, he was not talking. He certainly tried to talk, but the sounds that came out were not real words. Sometimes it was very frustrating, for both Mark and me. He would try to tell me something, but I couldn't understand what he was trying to say. I would pull out his favourite toys, puzzles, picture books; I would pick him up, walk with him, talk to him, and still I hadn't hit upon the right combination. Mark would get more upset and I would get more frantic. We just weren't communicating.

Mark's therapist explained how a child develops speech and language. She helped us to understand that although the words

“speech” and “language” are often used interchangeably, they actually refer to two different events. Language refers to the system of words and word combinations used for communication. Speech is one part of language; it is the oral expression of language or, in simpler terms, talking. Reading and writing are also expressions of language but in another form.

Mark was developing language but not speech. He was learning the meanings of the words spoken to him, but could not form sounds properly to imitate those words that he understood. The communication therapist told us that children with cerebral palsy may have speech problems, because their muscles do not move in a co-ordinated manner. This includes the muscles used for talking. It was difficult to tell just how limited his speech would be at this point. A programme of therapy to help Mark communicate was started immediately. I thought this would be the answer.

Another Way to Communicate

Mark had made some progress in his communication programme. He did understand more words and he began to make more sounds. He communicated by looking at the object he wanted, and I began to understand a few of his attempts at speech. It was apparent, however, that his speech continued to be severely limited. Not even his father could understand him. It seemed that we had come to an impasse.

It was during one of his therapy sessions that the therapist told me about a different way for Mark to communicate. She introduced me to Blissymbolics. Mark had just turned five at the time. I remember this, because for his fifth birthday I had given him a toy car, to which he formed a strong attachment. It was the Blissymbol for motor car  that he used first.

Blissymbolics is the name for a communication system that uses drawings instead of words. The therapist showed me some Blissymbols. The Blissymbol for chair  looked like a chair and the symbols house  and motor car  also looked like the objects they represented. Some other symbols seemed difficult at first but after they were explained, they seemed very logical. The symbol for school  really comes from three symbols: house  give  knowledge  . Now that was my idea of school!

Blissymbolics just might be the answer. That night I discussed it with my husband and we agreed to give it a try. If Mark could learn to show us the symbols for the words he tried to say, he could begin to communicate with us, and with others.

We were very excited. Finally we had a new challenge ahead. I was already anticipating what his first symbol expression might be.

The First Symbols

I was asked to prepare a list of words that would be useful to Mark both at home and at his special nursery school. The communication therapist found the Blissymbol for each word. She drew each symbol on a notebook page and added a picture to illustrate the symbol. She explained that the picture would help Mark learn in the early stages of symbol instruction. The picture would be removed when and if Mark learned the symbol. The first page was for “car”. The symbol  was drawn at the bottom of the page, with a photograph of Mark’s new car at the top. She showed me how to encourage learning by showing Mark the toy car and the symbol page at the same time. That day, I went home with three symbol pages that had pictures and Blissymbols of car, food, and music, which were Mark’s favourite things.

Over the next month everyone got into the act of helping Mark learn symbols. It seemed to take forever. One day when he was trying to tell me something, I pointed to the three symbol pages in front of him. Then it happened. He looked at the symbol for car and then at me. I quickly found his car, which had fallen on the floor beside him. I picked it up and gave it to him along with a lot of praise. He had told me something and I had responded correctly. We had communicated using symbols instead of spoken words!

Gradually the pictures were removed, as Mark learned the Blissymbols. Each symbol was then drawn on a large cardboard sheet by the therapist. This was Mark’s first Blissymbol display, and it went wherever he did.

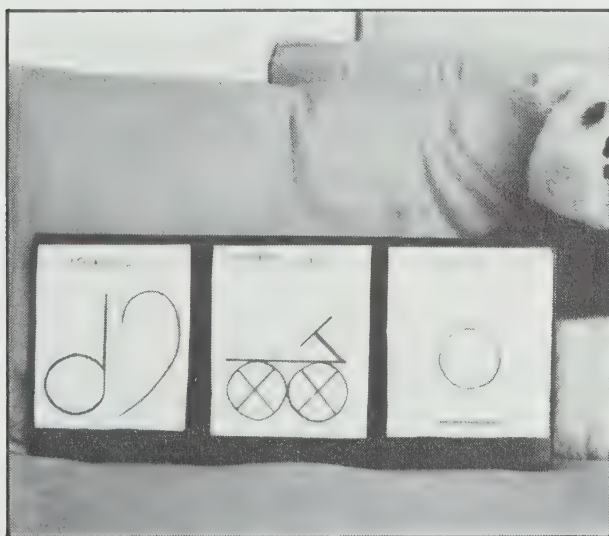


Figure 1:1 *Mark’s first symbol display was modest. The Blissymbols chosen for the display were those that were most meaningful for Mark and, therefore, the ones that he learned first. It was the beginning of a reliable communication system for Mark, which was gradually to expand into a symbol display of over 350 symbols.*

Supports for Blissymbol Communication

At first Mark would look at the symbols on his display to indicate his choice. This worked for awhile, when there were only a few symbols. As his symbol vocabulary grew, we had to find a better, more accurate way for him to show us which symbol he wanted.

The occupational therapist and physiotherapist were helping Mark to move and balance, but he still could not consistently control his hands to point to the symbols. It was a hit or miss sort of thing. The occupational therapist gave Mark a special chair that would help support his body. A tray to hold his symbol display was attached to the chair, which helped him to see the symbols and also held the display firmly in position. He was also given a pointer that he wore on his wrist. This made touching the symbols easier for him. We called it his helping finger.

Everyone worked together to help Mark, and by the time he entered school he had twenty symbols on his display that he used for communication. This was not enough — Mark was ready and eager to learn more.

Learning More Symbols (Expanding the Display)

Everyone continued to help Mark learn and use symbols. As Mark grew and experienced more of life, he naturally had more to talk about. He frequently received a new symbol display because he needed more and different symbols. It sounds confusing, but actually the displays were all quite similar in their symbol layout. Symbols were grouped together in categories. Each Blissymbol for a person was placed with other symbols for people. These were always printed on a yellow background. If the teacher or therapist added a new person symbol I knew where on the display to look for it. Action symbols (or verbs, as I had called them in grade school), were printed on a green background and grouped together next to the people symbols. Each symbol had a place to go on the display. This organization helped Mark and me find his new symbols.

It was an exciting time for us. We watched Mark's Blissymbol vocabulary grow and delighted in his stories of school and his friends there.

The Classroom

Mark was in a special class for children whose needs were similar to his. Therapists were available to help the children, and there was a special teacher to help Mark with his Blissymbol communication.

I remember my first visit to the class. There were six children working together. Some could speak; others could not. Some children were using symbol boards, but I was surprised to see that they were not like Mark's display. The teacher explained that each of the displays had been designed especially for the child who was to use it. The Blissymbol vocabulary that was chosen for the display reflected the child's interests and communication needs. The placement of the symbol vocabulary on the display and the size of the symbol figures took into account the child's physical abilities and limitations. A good display design successfully combines the knowledge one has of the child with the knowledge one has of the Blissymbol system, in order to make a communication board that is both meaningful and accessible to the user.

I spent the whole morning in the classroom and watched each child with excitement. One girl used her eyes to point to the symbols. That was how Mark had begun, but her system was much more elaborate. Another boy communicated with a machine that looked like a miniature typewriter. There was so much activity and there were so many options for children who could not speak. I felt that Mark was in good hands.

A New Beginning

Mark is now sixteen and will soon be entering a special class in a community high school. He has an electric wheelchair and 350 Blissymbols on his display. Mark's therapists are now trying electronic communication devices to help Mark use his Blissymbols even more effectively. For Mark, going to a community school is a new beginning. There will certainly be many challenges yet to come, but now we can talk about them and plan for the future together.

This story blends the experiences of many children and families learning to communicate. Each child's story is, of course, unique. Some children learn many symbols; other children learn few. However, success is not measured by the number of symbols that a child learns. Success is achieved each time an idea is shared through the symbol system called Blissymbolics.

CHAPTER 2

What is Blissymbolics?

Blissymbolics is the name for a communication system that uses drawings instead of words. The therapist showed me some Blissymbols. The Blissymbol for chair  looked like a chair, and the symbols for house  and motor car  also looked like the objects they represented.

Blissymbolics is a symbol system that conveys meaning through its shapes. The symbols are made up of basic geometric shapes, and each symbol has a specific meaning or concept attached to it. Symbols can be combined in a variety of ways to form new meanings, thereby creating a complex system that can express many different ideas.

The ability to extract meaning from shapes is a familiar process that occurs during reading. The brain is able to organize the printed shapes on the page into letters of the alphabet, which in turn are translated to their sound counterparts. In order to have any meaning, the sounds must be organized into a unit to form a word. The sounds of *c*, *a*, and *r* have little meaning separately. When organized into *c a r*, meaning is created. Reading is a complex process that requires much learning and mental integration. Unlike letters or sounds, each Blissymbol has a meaning, whether it stands alone or is combined with other symbols.

When the symbols for *up*  or *down*  are added to the symbol for *feeling* , three new meanings can be created, which express the emotions *happy* (“feeling up”) , *sad* (“feeling down”) , or *upset* (“feeling up and down”) . Each of the symbol elements relates directly to meaning. This provides a definite advantage for children who cannot learn to read, because they have had little experience with speech sound production and blending. Furthermore, since symbol elements carry their meaning over into new symbol combinations, past learning can be applied logically to new learning.

Blissymbolics, then, is a system of visual graphic symbols that stand for meanings or concepts. It is a system that is not confined by

conventional word or sound translations. The system’s uniqueness lies in its ability to provide a dynamic, expressive language medium for people who have limited ability to speak.

The Symbols

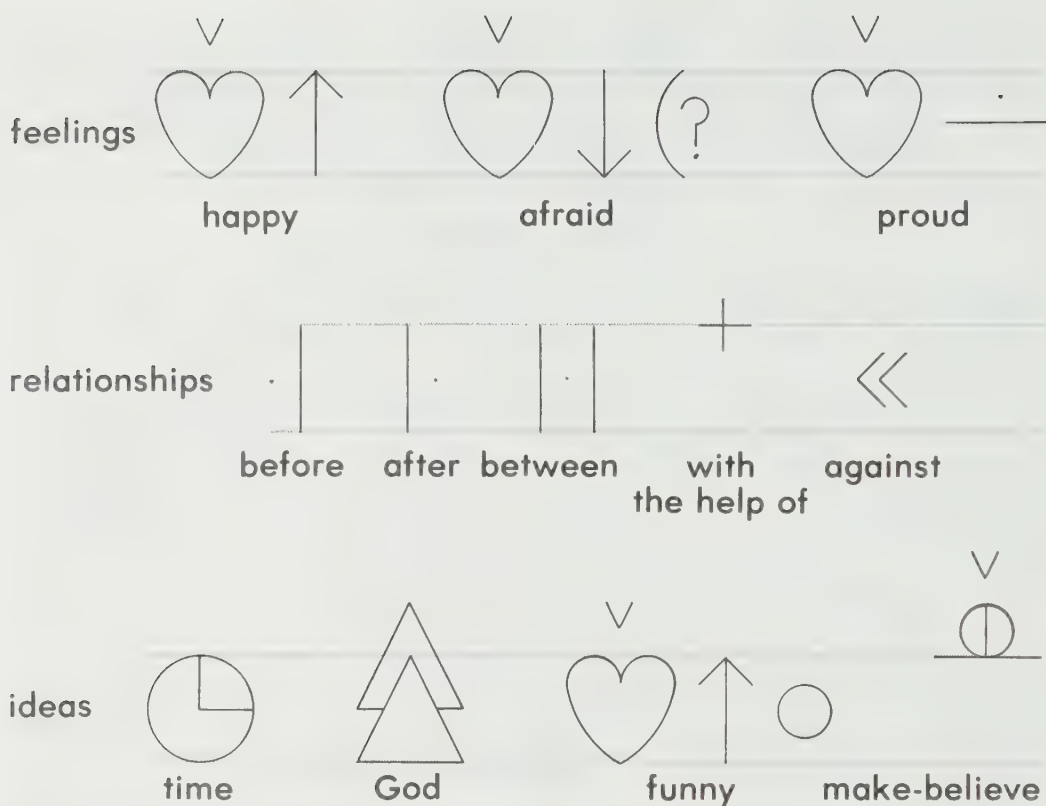
Blissymbols are derived from a small number of basic geometric shapes such as circles, squares, triangles, and horizontal and vertical lines. Symbols may be combined in an organized manner to create new symbols and new meanings. When the symbol for *protection* $\wedge$ is superimposed on the symbol for *woman* $\triangle$ the new meaning *mother* $\triangle^{\wedge}$ (“woman who protects”) is created. Similarly, *father* $\triangle^{\wedge}$ is composed of the *protection* and *man* symbols.

The symbols are sometimes graphically related to the objects or actions they represent. The symbols for *house* $\square$, *wheel* $\otimes$, and *chair* $\perp$ actually look like the objects they represent. Other symbols are familiar since they are in the form of international signs, such as the *question mark* $?$, and *same or equal* $=$.

Blissymbols represent many different meaning and grammatical categories. The examples below¹ illustrate the variety of meanings within the Blissymbol system.

people					
	man	mother	person	I, me	child
things					
	body	tool	book	flower	house
actions					
	(to) work	(to) wash	(to) see	(to) sleep	(to) feel) (emotion)

¹Reproduced with permission from H. Silverman et al, *The Handbook of Blissymbolics* (Toronto: Blissymbolics Communication Institute, 1978).



Symbols representing people, things, and ideas are usually the same as nouns in traditional grammar. Most action symbols function as verbs. Other symbols represent function words such as prepositions and conjunctions. Still others act as modifiers and are equivalent to adjectives and adverbs.

Special symbols called *indicators* further pinpoint meaning by indicating verb tense, plurals, and possessives that are found in traditional grammar systems of spoken and written languages. These allow the symbol user to express the complex and subtle relationships used in speech.

Individual symbols can be combined, just as speaking persons combine words to form sentences or ask questions. Blissymbolics can provide a system for communication which parallels the words and sentences that the speaking population takes for granted. The Blissymbol system is a new and exciting communication medium for these who, because of cerebral palsy, deafness, stroke, or mental retardation, are unable to speak.

History and Development

Blissymbols are the creation of Charles K. Bliss of Sydney, Australia. Mr. Bliss has devoted much of his life to the development of an international language that could be understood by people all over the world. In 1949, he published *Semantography*, which described

his symbol system in detail. The brilliance of his work was little recognized, however, until 1971, when a group of professionals at the Ontario Crippled Children's Centre began to use Blissymbols with physically disabled children. The symbols were readily learned by the children and provided them with a means of expression. By pointing to the desired symbol on a display board, the children could communicate, even though physical disabilities severely affected their speech.

From this initial effort, the Blissymbolic Communication Foundation developed in Toronto, Ontario in 1975.² The objective of the organization is to develop and disseminate information about Blissymbolics so that it will become an increasingly effective communication system for speech and language impaired persons. In order to facilitate the application of the system, the Institute regularly provides training in Blissymbolics to interested parents and professionals. BCI also has affiliate arrangements with individuals and groups in order to reach symbol users and their families throughout the world.

Before Blissymbolics

It was in 1971 that Blissymbols were first introduced to physically disabled children. Before this, picture boards, spelling boards, or prepared word lists provided methods of communication for children who could not speak. Unfortunately, these systems had limitations that continued to make expression a very difficult and frustrating experience.

Place yourself in the position of a physically disabled child who is unable to speak. You want to tell your teacher that your mother is coming to school tomorrow. If you had a spelling board or used a typewriter you would have to search for and select a total of twenty-one different letters:

M O M C O M E S C H O O L T O M O R R O W

Choosing from a list of words would reduce the search to four elements; however, both systems depend on adequate spelling and reading skills. If you could neither read nor spell, you might point to a picture of "mom" and "school" on a picture board in front of you. The word "tomorrow" would most likely be omitted, since it would be difficult to find a picture that represents the concept of

²The Blissymbolics Foundation was chartered as a non-profit corporation under the laws of The Province of Ontario in July 1975. In 1978, the name of the organization was changed to the Blissymbolics Communication Institute.

“tomorrow”. The resulting message “mom school” is incomplete and therefore less precise.

Using the Blissymbol system you would select four symbol squares on the symbol board to complete the message:

Mother come school tomorrow.



If you were a more advanced symbol user, the system would enable you to include possessive pronouns, prepositions, and tense indicators to make your message even more precise.

My mother will come to school tomorrow afternoon.



Blissymbolics may not be the answer for every child or adult who cannot talk, but it does have obvious advantages over earlier methods.

Blissymbolics in the Future

Many professionals from many different disciplines are working to make the Blissymbol system effective for a wide variety of needs and speaking situations. The symbol vocabulary is expanding and researchers are studying the use of electronic aids for more rapid, exact communication. Computers are helping symbol users to communicate over distance, much like talking on the telephone. Permanent symbol messages are becoming available as a printer reproduces the user's message on a page. Advanced technology as it is applied to Blissymbolics may open up educational and career opportunities that have traditionally been closed to the person who could not speak.

Blissymbolics, as applied to the non-speaking child, is in its infancy, with a solid foundation on which to grow. Blissymbol users and their families are encouraged to share in this growth by reading and learning about the symbol system and sharing their experiences with the professionals involved in teaching and developing symbol materials.

WHAT IS BLISSYMBOLICS?

A Learning Exercise

Some of the symbols seemed difficult at first but after they were explained they seemed very logical.

People often avoid the things they do not understand. This section will help the reader become familiar with the Blissymbol system. This is an independent study exercise. Refer to the answers at the back of the book to check your responses to the questions.

Blissymbol Vocabulary

At first glance, Blissymbols may appear very confusing. They have to be read in a way that is new. Once you have learned this, however, it is far more logical than the traditional spelling system used for writing and reading.

1. Pictographic Symbols

Some symbols are easily learned because they are pictographic; that is, the symbol actually *looks like* the object it represents.

Try to guess the meaning of the *pictographic symbols* below. The first one has been done as an example.

- | | | | |
|---|---|---|--|
| a) <u>wheel</u> | b) _____ | c) _____ | d) _____ |
|  |  |  |  |
| e) _____ | f) _____ | g) _____ | h) _____ |
|  |  |  |  |
| i) _____ | j) _____ | k) _____ | l) _____ |
|  |  |  |  |
| m) _____ | n) _____ | o) _____ | p) _____ |
|  |  |  |  |

- q) _____

- r) _____

- s) _____

- t) _____


2. Ideographic Symbols

Not all Blissymbols are pictographic. Some symbols are more abstract and *suggest* a meaning rather than depicting it directly. These symbols are called *ideographic symbols* since they illustrate or suggest an idea. There are some examples of ideographic symbols below. They will be used in answering the questions in Section 3 below.

room

cloth

water, liquid

feeling

down



an enclosure open on one side suggests a room

suggests interwoven threads

wave-like shape suggests water

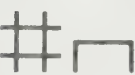
suggests emotion

downward pointing arrow suggests concept of down

3. Compound Symbols

In Blissymbolics, meanings are sometimes created by combining two or more symbols. These are called *compound symbols*. They are similar to compound words found in English: if, for example, the words "house" and "coat" are combined, the new meaning "housecoat" is created.

Refer to the ideographic symbols in Section 2 and the pictographic symbols in Section 1 to determine the meanings of the compound symbols below. The first one has been done.

- a)  cloth + table = cloth for the table, i.e. tablecloth
- b)  _____ + _____ = _____
- c)  _____ + _____ = _____
- d)  _____ + _____ + _____ = _____

e)  _____ + _____ = _____

f)  _____ + _____ = _____

g)  _____ + _____ = _____

h)  _____ + _____ = _____

i)  _____ + _____ = _____

4. Pointers

A *pointer* is an arrowhead that picks out details of a basic symbol. The detail becomes the meaning of the new symbol.

Guess the symbol meanings below by noting the direction and position of the pointers.

room

a) floor

b) _____ c) _____



legs and feet

d) hip

e) _____ f) _____



body

g) chest

h) _____



tree

i) _____



5. Indicators

Symbol meaning can be affected by the use of *indicators*: quarter-sized symbols placed above the existing symbol or selected by the user before he points to specific vocabulary. By the addition or substitution of indicators, a symbol may be changed from one part of speech to another.

The most commonly used indicators and their functions are described below. The Blissymbol for *mouth* undergoes changes in meaning according to the indicators used with it.

mouth



mouths

x



plural indicator (changes the symbol to a plural meaning)

talkative

v



description (evaluation) indicator (makes the symbol into a modifier, i.e. an adjective or an adverb)

(to) say, talk

^



action indicator (makes the symbol into a verb in the infinitive form: "to say," or in the present tense: "say," "says")

said, talked

)



past action indicator (changes the verb to the past tense)

will speak

(



future action indicator (changes the verb to the future tense)

Refer to the indicator functions and examples to guess the meanings of the Blissymbols below. The first one has been done.

a) (to) go



is changed to

went



b) book



is changed to

x



c) ear



is changed to



d) boy



is changed to



e) eye



is changed to



f) full



is changed to



g) rainy



is changed to

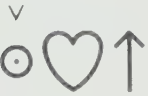


6. One Symbol: Many Meanings

Each Blissymbol is capable of representing many meanings that are synonymous with or related to one another. The actual word that is chosen depends upon the context. The word “beautiful” may be used to describe a picture; whereas, the word “attractive” may be used to describe a new hairstyle. “Beautiful” and “attractive” are synonyms.

Add two alternative meanings for each symbol below. They should be synonyms of the given word. The first one has been done.

a) beautiful 1. attractive b) waiting room 1. _____



2. pretty



2. _____

c) big



1. _____ d) (to) say



1. _____

2. _____

2. _____

e) (to) see



1. _____

2. _____

Expanding Symbol Vocabulary

The symbol vocabulary on a display board can be expanded by using various devices that change the meaning of a given symbol. The devices are particularly important to the symbol user who has the desire and ability to express complex ideas and relationships, but does not have space on his symbol display to accommodate all the symbols he may want to use.

1. The Combine Indicator

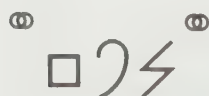
There are times when the symbol user does not have a symbol for the meaning he wants to convey. In such cases, he must combine several symbols to create the new meaning he desires. The meaning expressed is based on the total combination. The *combine indicator* ω is placed at the beginning and the end of the new symbol grouping. This signals that this new grouping is not part of standard Blissymbol vocabulary, but an invention of the symbol user for his own use.

Below are examples of new symbol expressions that can be created using the combine symbol. What are their new meanings?

a) motor car/snow _____



b) thing/ear/electric _____



c) wheelchair/electric _____



d) machine/ (to) see/inside _____



2. The Opposite Meaning Symbol

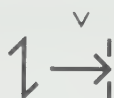
Some symbols have special functions and can be used to change the meaning of existing symbols. There are several symbols with special functions, but only the most common one will be introduced here. When the symbol ↴ is placed before an existing symbol, the new meaning is the opposite of the original meaning.

Determine the meanings of the symbols below when the opposite meaning symbol is added.

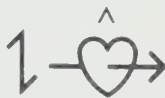
a) difficult



easy



b) (to) love



c) (to) forget



d) hot



3. Letters of the Alphabet

Children who have a knowledge of the alphabet are able to use the letters on their symbol display to be more exact in the meanings expressed. The letter is placed after the symbol and represents the first letter of the meaning that is desired. Below are some examples.

teenager + J = John



animal + c = cat

 c

vegetable (above ground) + p = peas

 p

fruit + a = apple

 a

Choose, from the Blissymbols below, the people symbols that represent the members of your family. Add the first letter of each name after the appropriate symbol. This is a common method of indicating proper names.

sister _____

 2

girl _____



son _____



boy _____



teenager _____



baby _____



CHAPTER 3

Who Uses Blissymbolics?

Mark was developing language but not speech. He was learning the meanings of words spoken to him, but could not form sounds properly to imitate those words that he understood.

Why Can't Some Children Speak?

A physical handicap affects muscles and their movement. When one pictures a child who is physically handicapped, one may think of a child who has limited or awkward movements of his arms and legs. This is an obvious and visible problem. In children like Mark, other less obvious muscles may be affected. Sometimes the muscles used for talking are so severely impaired that speech learning is impossible.

The muscles used for talking are called the muscles of articulation-phonation-respiration. These include muscles that move the lips and tongue, the larynx, and the lungs. Each muscle has to move in a skilled and co-ordinated manner with every other muscle to produce speech that can be understood. If a physical disability impairs the movement of the muscles used for talking, the act of talking becomes very difficult, and the sounds of speech are distorted and unintelligible.

Difficulties in talking may be a direct result of motor-speech problems, as in cerebral palsy, or may be indirectly produced by damage to supporting systems. Deafness, stroke, mental retardation, or severe emotional disorders can impair the hearing, language, or intellectual functions that are necessary for good speech production.

Handicaps of speech are initially less visible than other physical disabilities, but as the families of non-speaking children are well aware, the results of the handicap can be devastating. The child is unable to communicate and lives in a world where others must talk for him. Communication becomes a guessing game.

Blissymbolics can become an expressive system for some children who cannot speak, allowing them to say what they want to say for the first time.

Understanding Without Speech

It has been observed that families of non-speaking children are able to understand many of their child's attempts at communication. This is not surprising. A mother learns to decipher her newborn's cries. She knows whether it is a cry of pain, of pleasure, or of hunger, and responds appropriately. Close contact and familiarity breed understanding. Over the years, parents come to know and understand their child intimately. Parents develop a finely tuned ear and eye, and their child's sounds and gestures come to have meaning for them. Many parents are surprised to learn that other people hear only sounds and cannot understand the words their child is trying to say. Blissymbols may give the non-speaking child an opportunity to communicate with others and to communicate more effectively with those persons close to him.

Communication broadens relationships and enhances learning. It promotes social and emotional growth, thereby assisting in the development of an independent human being. Although communication is not essential to life itself, it is vital to the quality of life that the child experiences. Communicating with others is a basic human need and the right of every individual.

How Can Blissymbolics Help Children Communicate?

A team of professionals should carefully assess the child who is not developing speech, to determine what the causes of this might be. Based on the assessment, careful consideration is given to the child's communication programme. If Blissymbolics is recommended, the team, in discussion with the family, develops immediate and long-term teaching goals based on the assessment results. The teaching strategies and goals vary with each child. For purposes of explanation, three basic strategies are discussed in some detail below.

Some children understand language and are limited only in that they cannot speak. Blissymbols provide an expressive system that supports their sounds and gestures. Symbol vocabulary and sentence structure that parallel spoken language are emphasized. These children can become fluent in Blissymbolics, just as one becomes fluent in a second language. There are few limits to what they are able to express.

Other children are young and therefore are at an early stage of language and concept learning. Blissymbol instruction must take this into account, and follow the sequences of normal language development. The children's use of Blissymbols will initially be

limited to single symbols or symbol phrases, just as preschoolers' speech is limited to single words or phrases. In this case, instruction in concept, language, and speech development continues to be an integral part of overall communication teaching with the Blissymbol system.

Mark's communication programme began in this direction. The therapist emphasized language development, and planned her teaching sequence to reflect the stages of normal language acquisition. Training in speech sound production continued until it became clear that little progress was being made, and that Mark would not be able to achieve intelligible speech. At this point, the teaching strategy emphasized training in the use of Blissymbolics as the primary communication system. Sound production was not discouraged; in fact, Mark's mother continued to respond to his attempts at speech when she could understand them.

Some children have other problems in addition to their physical and oral disabilities. They may have short attention spans, be highly distractible, or be limited intellectually. It is to be expected that all learning will be more difficult for them. Although their progress is slow in all areas, it does not mean that learning is impossible. Blissymbols are being used effectively with mentally retarded and emotionally disturbed children. For children who have severe learning problems, Blissymbols may provide a limited vocabulary for expression that matches their understanding of language and language concepts. Single symbols for common objects and actions will be learned first. In time, these children may learn to string symbols together, but with few of our grammatical rules.

It is often difficult to predict just how much Blissymbols will become part of a child's total communication system. There are many factors to be considered that are directly related to the success of a symbol instruction programme.

Other Considerations

It is sometimes found that, in spite of adequate learning skills, a child has no desire to use the symbols that he knows. The child is unable to see the purpose of communicating directly, since others have always talked for him. Since there is no reason to communicate, there is no reason to use the symbols in a meaningful way.

Another child may have the desire and ability to communicate, but his severe physical disability prevents co-ordinated hand movements. Pointing to the symbols is difficult and becomes very time consuming. The expression of complex ideas that require the use of many symbols is not practical, even though the child is capable

of using higher language functions.

Another child may have some speech and prefer to use this, even though it is very difficult for others to understand. Blissymbols may be totally rejected, or used only in difficult or new speaking situations.

Sometimes it is the parents who reject the Blissymbol system. They are worried that symbols will replace the speech the child presently uses. Parents of young children are often afraid that early intervention with a non-speech system will prevent speech from developing later on. These concerns are understandable but are simply not based on fact. Speaking is naturally a more direct and efficient method of communicating. Children will continue to use and develop speech to their greatest potential. In fact, some children's speech actually improves as they learn to communicate with Blissymbols, because, with the introduction of another way to communicate, the pressure to speak is removed. As the child relaxes, muscle movements become smoother and more co-ordinated, and speech becomes easier to understand. Blissymbols will not inhibit speech and in some cases actually help speech production.

Blissymbolics means something different to each child and his family. It is the unique combination of factors in each case that prevent predictions of success or failure in the early stages of a symbol instruction programme. Perhaps the best advice is offered by a parent of a thirteen-year-old symbol user. The family was advised that Clare would not be able to learn Blissymbols because she was diagnosed as mentally retarded. Today Clare continues her education in the use of Blissymbols and is very happy and proud to be able to tell her teacher that, for example, her mother and father took her shopping. Clare's mother encourages other parents not to give up. A child who fails to learn Blissymbols at one time may be able to learn and use the system at a later date.

Learning more about who uses the Blissymbol system should allow parents to answer certain questions about their child's programme. "Why has he been introduced to the Blissymbol system? Are the short-term and long-term communication goals suited to the child's physical and intellectual capabilities? What other factors were considered in the overall programme design?"

If answers to these questions are not forthcoming, ask the symbol instructor to discuss the child's symbol programme in more detail. Only by communicating openly and honestly can a genuine understanding be reached. This understanding will assist parents in supporting and assisting their child as he learns to communicate using the Blissymbol system.

WHO USES BLISSYMBOLICS?

A Review Exercise

Choose the correct answer for the questions below.

1. Mark could not learn to speak because
 - a) he was deaf
 - b) the muscles used for talking did not move properly
 - c) he did not understand language
 - d) he had cerebral palsy
 - e) all of the above
2. The muscles used for talking are called
 - a) muscles of articulation
 - b) muscles of phonation
 - c) muscles of respiration
 - d) all of the above
3. Some children cannot learn to speak because of
 - a) mental retardation
 - b) deafness
 - c) emotional disturbances
 - d) all of the above
4. The introduction of Blissymbolics
 - a) may prevent speech from developing at a later date
 - b) may not occur alongside a speech training program
 - c) may actually assist speech development in some cases
5. Long-term teaching goals for Blissymbolic instruction
 - a) vary with each child, his family, and the situation
 - b) can be accurately predicted at the beginning of the programme
 - c) do not change over time
 - d) all of the above

Refer to the answers at the back of the book to check your responses to the questions.

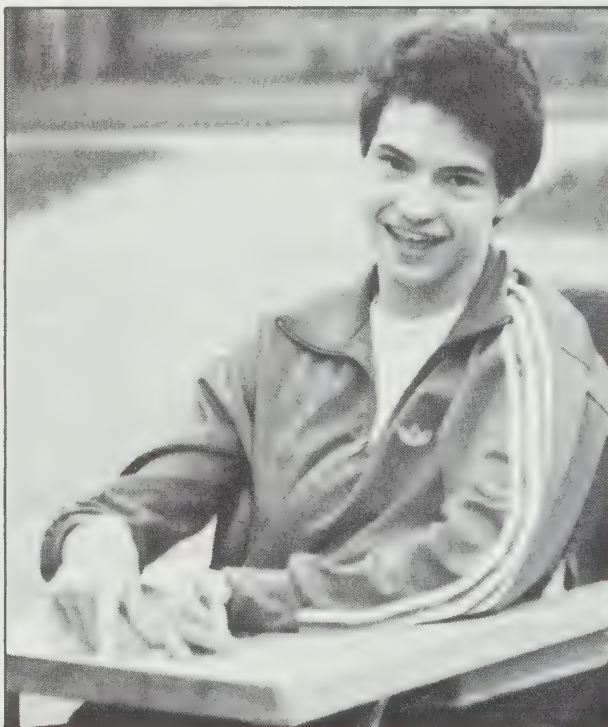
CHAPTER 4

The Symbol Display

A good display design successfully combines the knowledge one has of the child with the knowledge one has of the Blissymbol system in order to make a communication board that is meaningful and accessible to the user.

Mark's symbol display, described in Chapter 1, grew from three to 350 symbols. When Mark learned a new symbol, it was arranged on a larger surface for communication purposes. This arrangement of symbols is called the *symbol display* or *symbol board*. The symbol display provides the user with a group of symbols that becomes his expressive vocabulary. There can be many types of symbol displays and each child's particular needs are carefully considered before his display design is determined. Over the years, Mark had many different symbol displays, each one suited to his particular communication needs and abilities at the time. As Mark grew physically and intellectually, his symbol display grew with him.

Figure 4:1 *Joe was a student in the first Blissymbol class at the Ontario Crippled Children's Centre in 1971. He is now seventeen and communicates easily, using Blissymbolics and finger spelling. Joe prefers a black and white Blissymbol display because he feels that it is more adult than the coloured display he once had.*



Standard Displays

When Blissymbolics were first adapted for use by the physically handicapped, three standard displays were developed. These were pre-printed sheets showing either 100, 200, or 400 symbols. The choice of a display for a particular child depended largely upon the number of symbols that child could learn. As more and more children began using Blissymbols, it was realized that these standard displays were not always compatible with their individual needs. It was necessary, therefore, to develop formats that allowed for more variation. The standard displays were discontinued.

The Blissymbol Stamps

In 1978, the Blissymbolics Communication Institute's standard displays were replaced by a stamp system. Approximately 1400 Blissymbols have now been printed on stamps, available in two sizes (Figure 4.2). The self-adhesive stamps can be attached to a blank grid, following a specific vocabulary selection and layout pattern suited to the child.

With the use of stamps, the display becomes more individualized. The Blissymbols are selected and arranged to meet the child's physical and communication needs. New symbol vocabulary can be added gradually, as the child's symbol knowledge grows. Symbols that are no longer appropriate to the child's needs can easily be replaced with more current and relevant symbols.

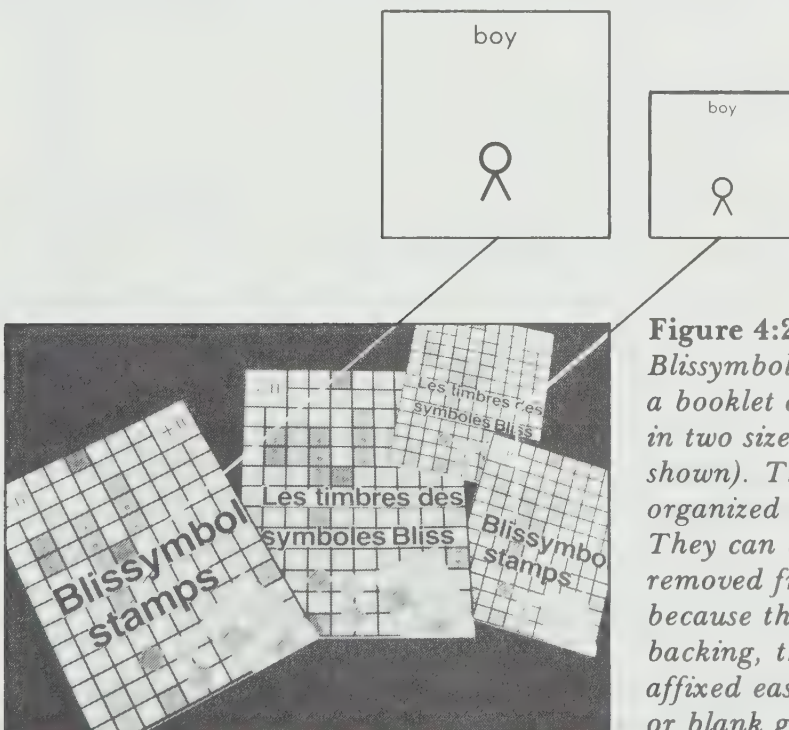
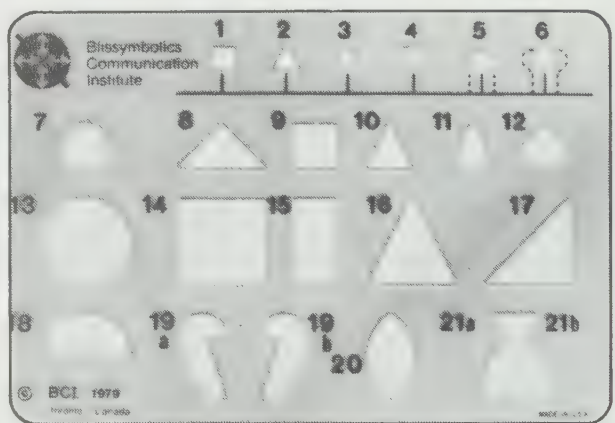


Figure 4:2 *The Blissymbol stamps come in a booklet and are available in two sizes (actual size shown). The stamps are organized into categories. They can be individually removed from a page, and because they have a sticky backing, they can be affixed easily to an object or blank grid.*

Drawing Blissymbols

Sometimes symbols larger than stamp size are required for children who are in the early stages of learning Blissymbols, or who have limited vision, or who require a larger surface area in order to select symbols accurately. For these children, symbols have to be drawn, either free-hand following the principles of symbol drawing, or with the use of a template designed for symbol drawing (Figure 4.3). Symbols that are drawn for a display must maintain accurate size, direction, position, and spacing of symbol shapes. This is very time consuming; however, it is often essential to the design of individualized displays.³

Figure 4:3 *The template is made of a hard plastic and contains the patterns that are used alone or in combination to draw Blissymbols. Use of the template saves time while maintaining accurate reproduction of the Blissymbols.*



The Display Layout

The actual display design is determined by many factors. First, it is imperative that the user can see each shape and discriminate among them. Sometimes the symbols must be enlarged or spaced widely apart to help the child see them.

The child's knowledge of symbol meanings is taken into account when determining the optimum number of symbols to be included on the display. Furthermore, consideration must be given as to how new symbol vocabulary will be added to the display as the child's vocabulary grows. Symbol learning may be assisted by organizing the symbols into their equivalent parts of speech. "Pronouns," "verbs," and "prepositions" would be placed in separate areas of the display. Other children may find it easier to communicate if the symbols are organized into functional categories. In this case, for example, all clothing and dressing symbols, mealtime symbols, or symbols depicting family members would be placed together. Children with

³For more detail on symbol drawing refer to H. Silverman et al, *The Handbook of Blissymbolics* (Toronto: Blissymbolics Communication Institute, 1978).

some reading skills may locate symbols more quickly if they are placed in alphabetical order.

The most important consideration in display design is determining how the user is going to indicate his symbol selection for the listener. Is he physically capable of pointing to a symbol square with his finger or fist? How large does the symbol have to be before selection is accurate? Often, the child's physical limitations impose the greatest difficulty in designing an appropriate display.

Some children who are unable to point with a finger or fist must learn to use another part of their body to point to symbols. Some children learn to point with their eyes. They indicate their symbol



Figure 4:4 *Chantal uses an eye-coding system called E-Tran. Each Blissymbol on her display has a number code. Since Chantal lacks the hand control to point directly to the individual symbol squares, she indicates her symbol selection by gazing at the corresponding number(s) marked on the plexiglass. The listener then refers to the symbol display to find the Blissymbol she intended.*

choice by looking at the symbol or a number code for the symbol. This is called an eye-pointing system (Figure 4.4). Other children use special equipment to help them indicate their symbol. These will be considered in the next chapter in more detail.

In summary, it is important to design each symbol display for the child who will be using it. Although the displays can and do vary greatly, there is a common purpose to each of them. The symbol display is the on-going arrangement of Blissymbols on a surface for communication purposes. The symbol display will change over time in an effort to provide the user with an updated system that meets his changing needs and abilities.

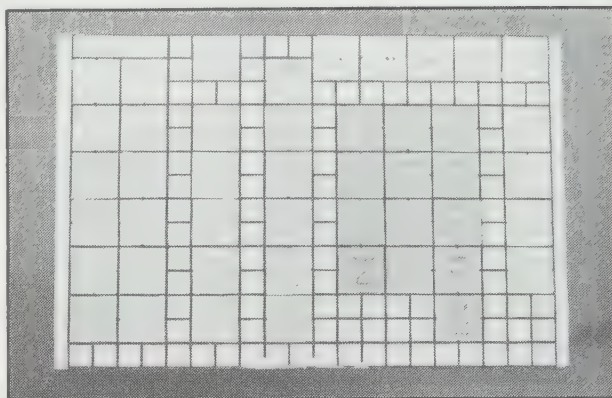
An Example of a Symbol Display

One type of symbol display is illustrated in Figure 4.5. In this example, the symbols are arranged in groups based on meaning and

grammatical categories. Notice that the symbols denoting persons are grouped together on the left side of the symbol display. Symbols representing action are located beside them.⁴

To the right of action symbols are symbols that convey a descriptive meaning such as *hot*, *happy* or *big*. Symbols for things are next — these often represent the largest vocabulary grouping. This left-to-right order reflects the grammar of the English language and helps the symbol user as he combines symbols to form sentences.

Figure 4:5 Michele's Blissymbol display contains forty-two symbols organized into meaning and grammatical categories. This arrangement aids the construction of basic symbol sentences that follow the rules of English grammar. This is a common method of organizing Blissymbols on a blank grid.



people	+	action	+	description	+	thing
	+		+		+	
I	+	want	+	clean	+	dress.

Certainly there will be exceptions to this progression as in the symbol sentence “*Today* (time) *I* (people) *like* (action) *you* (people).” The user and listener can still rely on general groupings to locate the symbols. On many symbol displays, colour coding the different categories further helps the selection of symbols. For example, all people symbols are printed on yellow backgrounds. To look for a people symbol, the user would first go to the yellow area on the display, and then search for the desired symbol within this group.

Designing displays takes time. However, a child should not be kept waiting for the perfect display design before communication with symbols can begin. It is important to get started right away by providing him with a temporary display. This will allow the therapists to assess the child’s use of symbols and the need for his next display. Revisions are on-going throughout the communication programme. The important thing is to get started.

⁴On each Blissymbol stamp a word appears with a symbol. This helps the listener to interpret the message even though he may be unfamiliar with Blissymbols.

THE BLISSYMBOL DISPLAY

A Review Exercise

Choose the correct answer for the questions below.

1. A Blissymbol display
 - a) must contain either 100, 200, or 400 symbols
 - b) is often referred to as a symbol board
 - c) does not change over time
 - d) is often referred to as a stamp and grid system
2. The standard displays are no longer available because
 - a) they are too costly
 - b) they are too large and cumbersome
 - c) they do not allow for enough variation
 - d) all of the above
3. When deciding the symbol layout, it is important to
 - a) determine whether the user can see each shape
 - b) determine whether the user has a means to select each Blissymbol on the display
 - c) consider the symbol user's knowledge of symbol vocabulary
 - d) consider how the symbol display will change over time
 - e) all of the above
4. In the symbol display example, the organization of Blissymbols illustrates
 - a) the correct method for arranging symbols on a display
 - b) grouping by meaning and grammatical categories
 - c) grouping by function
 - d) all of the above
5. A child should begin learning symbols when
 - a) his symbol display is completed
 - b) all assessments are completed
 - c) he is showing an interest in communicating with symbols
 - d) all of the above

Refer to the answers at the back of the book to check your responses to the questions.

CHAPTER 5

Special Equipment

The occupational therapist gave Mark a special chair that would help support his body. A tray to hold his symbol display was attached to the chair, which helped him to see the symbols and also held the display firmly in position. He was also given a pointer that he wore on his wrist. This made touching the symbols easier for him. We called it his helping finger.

Some children need additional supports or equipment before they are able to use the symbols on their display for communication. This extra preparation is required when the child's physical disability prevents pointing or eye-coding for the selection of symbols. A child who is severely physically disabled may not have any movements that are reliable for symbol pointing. Even if the movement can be performed, the action may take so long to do before it is accurate that the communication exchange is forgotten. Symbol selection is very difficult and often the listener is unsure about which symbol the child actually pointed to. In this case, communication with Blissymbols becomes a very frustrating experience for both the symbol user and the listener.

These special problems require much investigation before a solution can be reached. The child's treatment team must work closely together to solve the problems that hinder communication with Blissymbols. Some of their considerations are discussed in this chapter.

Seating and Positioning

Proper seating is essential for any child who is physically disabled, but especially important for the severely handicapped child. Without good support of the body, the arms and hands will flail even more. The child may be using all his energy to keep his head and body upright. This instability will prevent the co-ordinated arm and hand movements that are necessary for reliable pointing. A chair or insert that keeps the child's pelvis and hips back and his body in a straight

position will help support the body and decrease abnormal movements. Movement of other muscles will be more easily achieved if the child's body is well supported and he begins to feel secure. Arm and hand control may improve over time and with the support of therapy. Sometimes proper seating and positioning can result in improved hand function that would allow finger or fist pointing. Even if hand control remains poor, the head may become steady enough for the child to develop eye-coding skills (Figure 5.1).

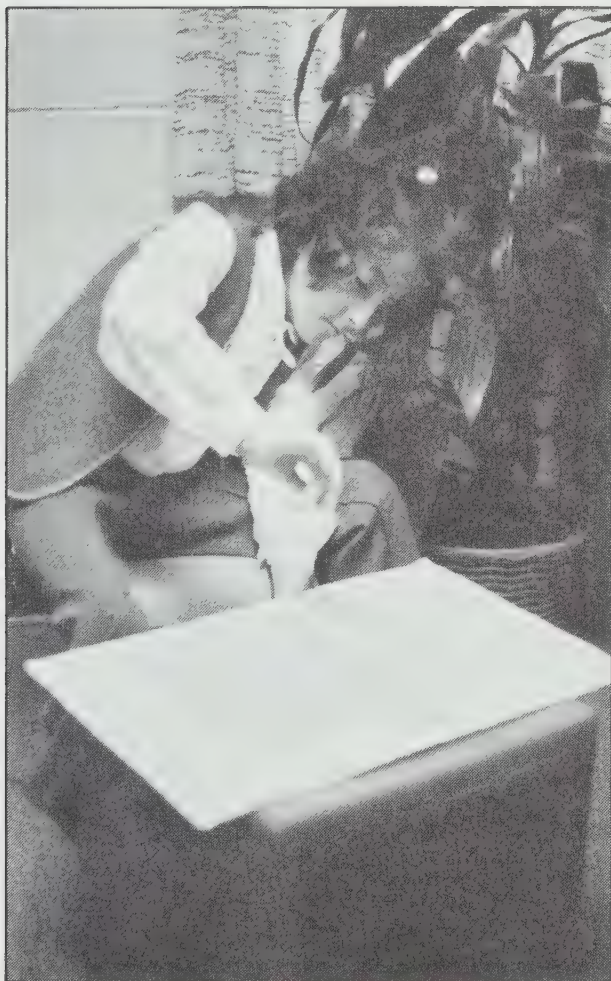
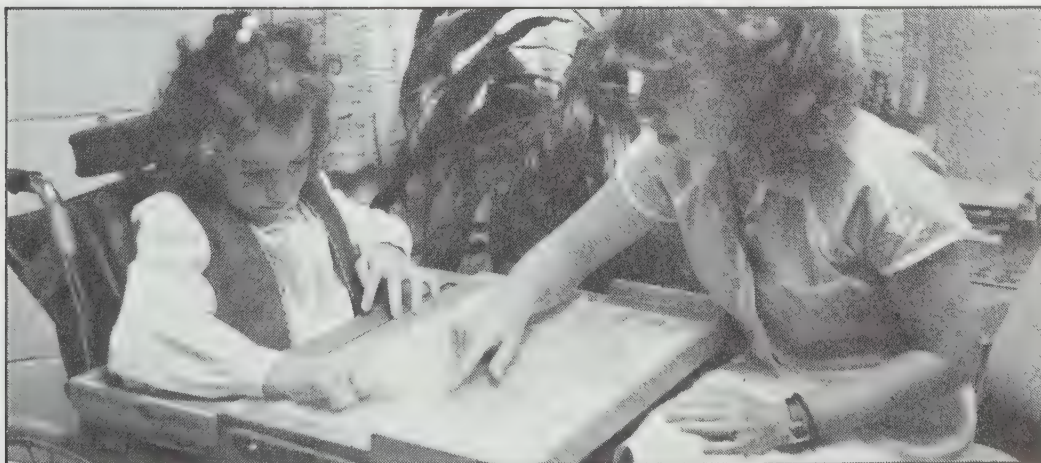


Figure 5:1 *Supportive seating to maintain a secure body position is important for children who have difficulty in pointing. The photograph on the left shows Deborah falling as she reaches forward, because her body is not sufficiently supported. She attempts to stabilize herself by wrapping her leg around the leg of the chair, but with little success. Deborah attempts to point by moving her shoulder, which will cause her to overshoot her target. The photograph below illustrates good trunk support, which allows more controlled use of the arms, hand, and finger. There is no extra or conflicting movement of the body and Deborah is successful in isolating one finger to indicate her symbol selection.*

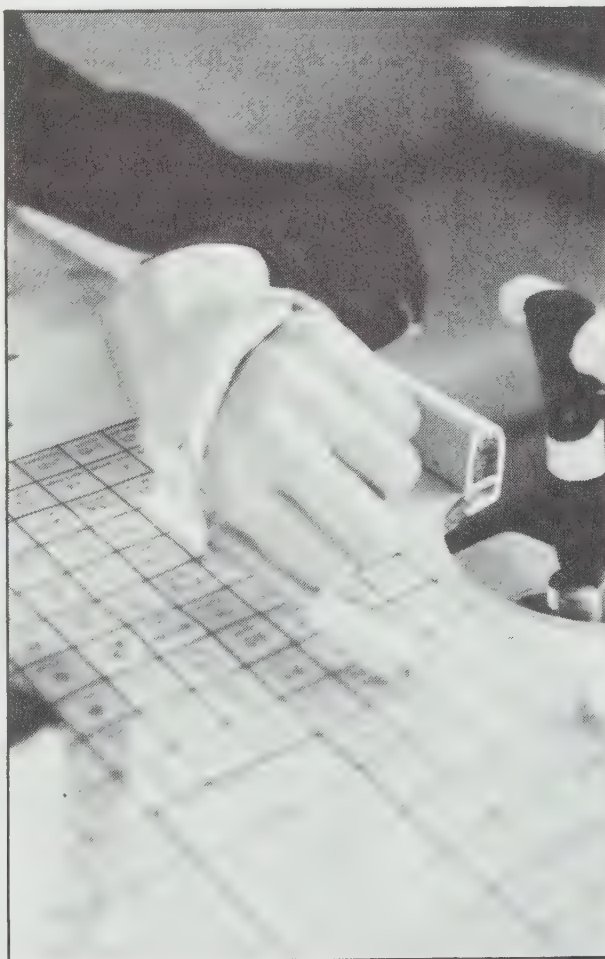


Interfaces

In some cases, good seating is not enough to produce a consistent pointing response. Other methods have to be devised that will help the child to indicate his symbol message. *Interface* is a term used to describe any device that comes between the child and his symbol display to aid targeting. This could be a hand pointer, head stick, or mechanical device (Figure 5.2).

The basic principle of an efficient interface is that it helps channel the large, inaccurate movements of the child into a finer, more precise and consistent action. For the child who cannot finger point, interfaces become another tool required for Blissymbol communication. In the interests of keeping communication simple and direct, many factors are taken into consideration before an interface is recommended for either temporary or permanent use. It is not always feasible to provide interfaces for the child who cannot point by direct selection. Pointers often are lost; electronic interfaces break down. Sometimes it is better to re-evaluate the symbol layout carefully and to determine whether it can be modified to suit the physical abilities of the symbol user.

Figure 5:2 Susan uses a simple mechanical device called a hand pointer, which is made of moulded plastic and attached to her hand by a velcro strap. The rigid pointer can be slid along the symbol display until Susan hits her symbol selection. The rubber tip prevents the pointer from sliding off the symbol square before the listener can confirm the symbol choice.



New Technology

Computers and mini-technology have also entered the field of Blissymbol communication. Electronic displays with a memory bank, printed readouts, or synthesized speech are available commercially. Although still in the early stages, these systems offer new possibilities to meet the total communication needs of the non-speaking child or adult. The next ten years will bring rapid advances in systems for the non-speaking person as computer technology grows and costs decrease.

This chapter served as an introduction to the supports available to help children communicate with Blissymbols. The merit of any support or specialized system can only be determined by its usefulness to the child as he attempts to communicate. Evaluation of support systems must be an on-going part of the overall communication programme as both the child and the systems available are changing constantly.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS

A Review Exercise

Choose the correct answer for the questions below.

1. Support systems for Blissymbol communication consist of
 - a) the symbol display
 - b) the Blissymbol vocabulary
 - c) special equipment
 - d) all of the above
2. A proper chair for the symbol user is important, because it
 - a) provides a specific location for communication to take place
 - b) provides a sturdy base for attachment of the symbol display
 - c) provides support for the child's body
 - d) all of the above
3. An interface
 - a) is a type of equipment to help the child access symbols
 - b) helps channel larger muscle movements into finer, more discrete movements
 - c) can be a headstick, hand pointer, mechanical, or electrical device
 - d) comes between the child and the symbol display
 - e) all of the above
4. Support systems are
 - a) required when consistent and efficient movement is disrupted
 - b) very reliable
 - c) permanently needed by the symbol user
 - d) required when the symbol display design does not allow accessing of each symbol
 - e) all of the above

Refer to the answers at the back of the book to check your responses to the questions.

CHAPTER 6

How Can I Help?

Over the next month everyone got into the act of helping Mark learn symbols. It seemed to take forever. One day when he was trying to tell me something, I pointed to the three symbol pages in front of him. Then it happened. He looked at the symbol for car and then at me.

Even though a child cannot speak, he probably has always communicated. His sounds, gestures, actions, facial expression, laughter, and tears have a special meaning for those close to him. It is because of the unique understanding between a parent and child that parents can best rechannel these early communication patterns into more precise expression using the Blissymbol system.

This chapter provides some practical suggestions for helping a child develop communication using the Blissymbol system.

Creativity

Don't be afraid to be creative. There are no hard and fast rules in teaching Blissymbolics. What fails with one child may be successful with another. Special understanding of a child's interests and needs should be used to stimulate learning. Translate a favourite game, book, or puzzle into Blissymbols. Label clothing, food, and other common household objects with the appropriate Blissymbols. Try anything that is fun and makes learning a pleasant experience.

Opportunities for Communication

Provide opportunities for using Blissymbols to communicate. Parents of non-speaking children may have learned to anticipate the child's every need. The child may see no need for communication, since choices have always been made for him. Begin to give him opportunities for choice, and encourage the use of symbols for expressing these choices. Letting a child choose his clothes, food, or a play activity could easily be incorporated into daily routines. An older symbol user could be encouraged to plan his own party or

prepare the family shopping list. Activities such as these would certainly provide excellent opportunities to teach new symbol vocabulary and support attempts at symbol use at either a complex or simplified level.

Motivation

A desire to learn is a key factor in the success of any teaching programme. If a child is not motivated to learn a new form of communication, Blissymbol training will be very difficult.

Adults do things for different reasons, and so do children. Some people may look for a job because of a desire for change, while others are motivated by the financial reward. Similarly, some children learn symbols to gain praise from their teacher; others may learn symbols because they see their classmates using a symbol display.

Determine what is the best motivation. Is it praise, special attention, games, or promises of a special reward? Use this knowledge to begin teaching the meanings of a few important symbols.

Once a child has learned a small vocabulary, the motivation should come from using the symbols themselves. He begins to learn that he can control his world. By pointing to the symbol for *food*, he gets to eat; or by pointing to *pain in legs* he receives comfort and relief. For a child who is very limited physically, the control that comes from communication can become a very powerful motivator in itself.

Modelling

Parents of speaking children help teach their child to talk by modelling the adult speech and language patterns. A child who says “doggie bark”, might receive the response: “Yes, the dog *is* barking.” This is modelling, and it helps a child learn a more acceptable way of talking.

In Blissymbolics, just as in spoken language, modelling can be a very effective method of expanding and correcting symbol communication. The parent defines the next step to be mastered and shows the child the correct form. A mother may model by pointing to the symbol for *food* when the child gestures to the kitchen. Or if a child is using only one symbol at a time, the parent may model a group of symbols that expresses the same message but in a more exact way. If the child points to grandmother, the parent may expand this by pointing to and drawing the symbols for *grandmother dinner*. At a more advanced stage, modelling of English grammar or correct use of symbol strategies may become a teaching technique. The

advantage of modelling is that it begins with what the child wants to talk about and expands upon it. Modelling means showing the child the next step, thereby gradually leading him to more effective and efficient Blissymbol communication.

Understanding

It is impossible to be a good teacher of something that is not fully understood. In order to help a child learn the Blissymbol system, it is important to teach yourself first. It is important to take time to learn the capabilities and limitations of the system. Study the Blissymbols the child is presently using and anticipate those that he may want to use in the future. Be prepared to help lead the child to the next step. Try to communicate a Blissymbol message to another member of the family or use only symbols for communication for a period of time. What does it feel like? Is it easy, frustrating, or limiting?

Talk over your concerns and questions with the Blissymbol instructor. This interest and support will be greatly appreciated, no matter how trivial the question might appear.

Needs-Based Teaching

Parents develop a special knowledge of their child's needs. Initial teaching in Blissymbolics should be closely linked to those things that are important to the child. Plan an appropriate beginning vocabulary with the child's Blissymbol instructor. Vocabulary tied to daily routines is a good place to start. This may include food, names of family members, and names of special places and activities that can be used as the child goes about his every-day life. There may be certain words that would help parents in their daily routines with the child. One child who threw a temper tantrum at mealtimes was given symbols for various drinks and foods. Mealtimes became much more pleasant for mother and child as he became better able to indicate his likes and dislikes.

Integration

Symbol use must be integrated into a wide variety of situations and living experiences. The symbol user should be helped to use his new system of communication with all persons with whom he comes into contact.

It is frequently observed that many symbol users are limited by the situations in which communication occurs. Communication with

Blissymbols may be attempted only in structured or familiar contexts such as a symbol lesson or conversation with family or close friends. Unfamiliar or more spontaneous communication situations may cause the child to revert to old habits and let others talk for him. In this case, the child has not yet integrated his symbol skills in order to meet his communication needs.

Encourage the child to use symbols with different people and in different situations. It may help to begin with the immediate family and gradually extend symbol use to more distant relatives and friends. Tell family and friends about the Blissymbol system and how it is used for communication. Specific instructions for the listener can be attached to the symbol display to help the child in new situations (Figure 6.1). Most people will be very interested to learn about the system. The instructions help the listener feel comfortable as he comes to understand the reasons behind symbol communication.

Ensure the symbol display is available at all times. This will provide many opportunities for him to use his new symbol system in a wide variety of situations and with a variety of people.

Integration of symbol skills takes time. The many hours of practice will be worth it, however, when for the first time communication occurs between the child and a stranger. This is quite an accomplishment, when the only communication so far may have been with family members. Integration of symbol use allows the child to use his symbol skills in a variety of settings with a variety of people for communication.

Figure 6:1 *Instructions to the listener should be attached to the Blissymbol display. This helps the listener unfamiliar with the system to understand the Blissymbol communication system and to receive any special instructions that assist communication.*

My name is MARK. I can hear and understand you, but I cannot speak very well. Blissymbols help me communicate. When I want to say something I point to the symbol on my board. The meaning of the symbol is printed above to help you understand. I can point to symbols better if you put my pointer on my left hand. My pointer is attached to the side of the tray.

Comfortable Seating

Comfortable seating is essential for both the listener and the child during symbol communications.

Seating for the symbol user should be comfortable while providing support for the body. When the child feels secure, pointing skills, concentration, and attention will improve.

Comfortable seating should also be considered for the listener. The average person speaks at a rate of 145 words per minute, while the symbol user may point to symbols at the rate of three to 25 symbols per minute. It quickly becomes apparent that listening to the symbol user will be far more time consuming. Establish an unhurried atmosphere and relax. The child will be better able to coordinate his motor movements and express his message if the pressure to hurry is removed.

Try to sit at eye level while facing the child. This establishes eye contact and allows exchange of facial expressions, which are an important part of communication. Standing above the child should be avoided, because it may encourage thrusting of the whole body as he raises his head to look at his listener.

The child does not always have to be seated in a chair for symbol communication. Explore other positions. Perhaps a pillow or wedge could be put under the child's chest to raise and free the arms for pointing while he lies on the floor or bed, as shown in Figure 6.2. Try to discover new positions for the child so that he is able to communicate in as many places as possible. What might seem impossible at first may be successful with time and practice.



Figure 6:2 *Roberta is able to point to her symbols if her shoulders and upper body are raised and supported by a pillow. This position allows more flexibility in her communication, since she does not have to depend on her wheelchair and tray.*

Availability of Symbols

The symbol display should be available to the child at ALL times. Think of the display as his voice. Imagine what it would be like if you had to leave your voice in the cupboard and you were able to talk only when someone decided to bring your voice to you. Opportunities for communication happen throughout the day, and symbols should be there for immediate comment on those things that are important to the child.

If the child's symbol display is too bulky for all situations, create specialized displays for specific situations. Smaller displays that contain situational vocabulary may be one answer: symbol placemats can be designed for use at mealtimes; symbol towels can contain the essential vocabulary used at bathtimes. Portable folding displays are available for use outside of the home.

Discuss any special needs and problems with the child's symbol instructor. If symbols are to become a child's voice, they must be available for use throughout the day, every day.

Total Communication

Blissymbols provide one means of expression for the child who cannot speak. It is not his only avenue of expression, however. Facial expression, body posture, assertiveness or passiveness of motor movements, vocalizations, and eye contact contribute to communication as well. This is termed "total communication" and it is an important part of symbol use. Sometimes an idea can be conveyed just as effectively, or more effectively, through gestures. The child's gestures, vocalizations, and facial expressions as he uses symbols should be encouraged.

Be aware of the child's special expressions and how they provide meaning. Does the child lower his head for "no" or smile for "yes"? Does a certain look indicate that he doesn't understand?

Parents quickly come to understand their child's total communication patterns. It may help to keep a list and share these patterns with the symbol instructor. They are just as much a part of his communication system as a smile or tone of voice is to the speaking person.

Invention

Once the symbol user has learned many symbols, he can begin to create new symbol combinations that will expand the vocabulary available to him. A Blissymbol display cannot hold the range of vocabulary that the speaking child has available to him. The symbol

user can become inventive to create new symbol meanings that he does not have on his board. The child who combines the symbol for *money* with the symbol for *container* is able to invent the new symbol “purse” or “piggy bank”. The specific meaning is determined by the topic of conversation.

To help a child understand the versatility of his symbols, invent symbols for common objects around the house or in the community. Blissymbols might be created to indicate the washing machine, the teapot, a rock concert, or a parking ticket. It is fun to combine symbols to create new meanings. Refer to the simple diagram in Figure 6.3. Think of an object, perhaps the cottage. Now put the symbol representing the main idea in the centre of the circle. The supporting ideas are written on the radiating lines. After drawing upon many ideas choose the ones that are most important when thinking about a cottage. In the new symbol combination, place the main idea (*house*) first and then add the most important supporting ideas (*summer, holiday*). Keep the new symbol expression as short as possible while conveying the meaning adequately. The combine indicator $\oplus$ is placed at the beginning and end of the symbol to indicate that a new symbol expression is being created for communicating an idea.⁶

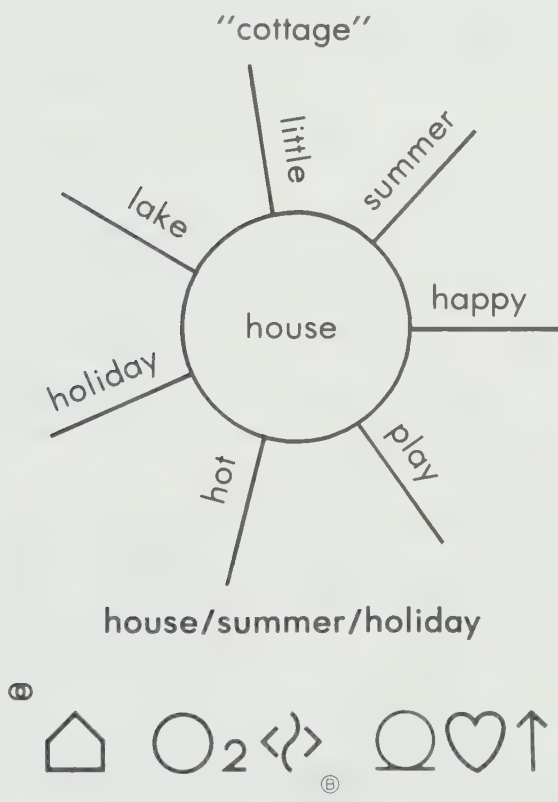


Figure 6:3 This illustration shows one way of helping the symbol user to learn the combine strategy for creating new symbol meanings. Once the strategy is mastered, the user can produce an unlimited number of new symbol meanings for communication.

⁶Before creating a combined symbol for on-going use, refer to B. Hehner, Ed., *Blissymbols for Use*, which lists approximately 1400 symbols. The symbol may already exist as part of standard Blissymbol vocabulary.

The ability to combine symbols using the combine indicator will greatly expand the child's usable vocabulary and allow him to express himself on a wider variety of topics.

Invention also refers to the ability to alter a symbol message while maintaining the desired meaning. This is helpful if the first attempt at communication has been unsuccessful. If the listener does not understand, the symbol user may have to rephrase his symbol message in a different way, just as a speaking person would do if at first misunderstood. The ability to alter the symbol message and invent alternative ways to express the same idea may often help the user to get his message across.

Invention of new symbol expressions using the combine indicator or the creation of alternative symbol sentences requires a sophisticated knowledge of language. Many children are not able to develop the skills necessary for this level of symbol communication. In each case, the child's stage of language development will determine his ability to create new meanings using the Blissymbols he has available on his display.

One Question Rule

A symbol response takes time. The child has to process your question or statement, decide on an appropriate response, locate the symbols needed for a response, plan a grammar and sequencing strategy, and, finally, perform the necessary motor movements to point to the symbols he has chosen to include.

Many people, in their attempts to help the child, jump in with another question, or start guessing possible answers. Do not interrupt. A question on top of a question or anticipation of the answer is confusing to the symbol user. He will not know which question to answer first and may give up trying to respond altogether. Interrupting someone is not polite at any time, but it is especially frustrating and confusing for the symbol user.

Ask one question at a time and then wait for a response. If the symbol user's response is not understood, or confusing, help the user unscramble his message. Again, ask one question at a time: "Who are you talking about?" "What did he do?" "When did it happen?" Wait for an answer before asking the next question.

Sometimes attempts at reorganization fail and the message still cannot be understood. Then it might be helpful to ask: "Did you understand my question?" "Is there a symbol on the board that answers my question?" or "Do you know the answer?" The last question is particularly important. The words "I don't know" are a

large part of a speaking child's vocabulary. It is necessary that symbol users also have this response available. The one question rule avoids confusion and helps the symbol user to clarify his message.

Never Talk Down

Remember that the fact that a child cannot speak does not mean that he cannot hear. He has listened to and learned from those around him all his life. Often, his expression with Blissymbols may not truly represent his understanding of language. It is important that people do not simplify their language when talking to him. Speak to the child at a level that is appropriate to his understanding of language. Talk to him about events and ideas that are stimulating.

Summary

Helping children to communicate is an exciting, pleasurable, and rewarding experience. The thirteen key principles discussed in this chapter are included below for your reference. Use these guidelines to encourage communication using the Blissymbol system in the child's natural environment, for it is ultimately those persons in daily contact with the child who can best encourage the spontaneous interchange of ideas and feelings using the Blissymbol system.

Creativity

Opportunities

Motivation

Modelling

Understanding

Needs-Based

Integration

Comfortable Seating

Availability

Total Communication

Invention

One Question

Never Talk Down

It is fitting that the first letters of these principles combine to spell **COMMUNICATION**. Teaching Blissymbolics cannot be neatly separated from the teaching of communication. A child's mastery of symbols is one achievement, but his use of these symbols for communication is the ultimate objective.

HOW CAN I HELP?

A Review Exercise

Choose the correct answer for the questions below.

1. Opportunities for communication
 - a) encourage the child to use the symbols he is learning
 - b) have to be carefully structured in a teaching situation
 - c) occur when the child has significant mastery of the Blissymbol system
 - d) all of the above.
2. Modelling is a teaching technique
 - a) used only in Blissymbol instruction
 - b) that helps the child master the next learning goal
 - c) that reflects correct English grammar
 - d) that begins with the parent's idea
 - e) all of the above
3. Integration of symbol skills is achieved when the child
 - a) uses his symbols for communication in a wide variety of settings
 - b) shows confidence in communicating with others
 - c) communicates with a variety of people
 - d) communicates in a spontaneous manner
 - e) all of the above
4. Total communication refers to
 - a) use of Blissymbols instead of speech
 - b) the gestures used by your child
 - c) those acts that contribute to meaningful communication
 - d) all of the above
5. The symbol user who is inventive can
 - a) create new symbol combinations for his personal use
 - b) rephrase his symbol message if his listener does not initially understand
 - c) converse on a wide variety of topics
 - d) all of the above
6. Without looking back, see if you can remember the thirteen key principles to help the child learn and use Blissymbolics. Remember that the first letters of the principles combine to spell the word COMMUNICATION.

C _____

Refer to the answers at the back of the book to check your responses to the questions.

CHAPTER 7

For More Information

This manual is designed to provide an introduction to the Blissymbol system of communication. It is to be hoped that this introduction has aroused an interest to learn more. The child's symbol instructor will be able to answer specific questions about the child's Blissymbol programme or elaborate on topics discussed in this manual.

For more information on the system itself, contact the Blissymbolics Communication Institute (BCI). This organization gathers and distributes information about Blissymbolics on a world-wide basis. Training workshops and associate memberships are available to keep interested persons up to date in this rapidly expanding field. Films, slides, and videotapes are also available through BCI for parent groups and information sessions.

For more details about the work of the Blissymbolics Institute, write to:

The Blissymbolics Communication Institute
350 Rumsey Road
TORONTO, Ontario
M4G 1R8
Canada

Parents and friends who have committed themselves to helping the non-speaking child learn Blissymbolics have a responsibility to seek answers to their questions. The resources are available and persons working in the field are eager to offer their knowledge and support in this endeavour.

ANSWERS TO THE CHAPTER EXERCISES

Chapter 2 What is Blissymbolics? (Blissymbol Vocabulary)

1. Pictographic symbols

- | | | | |
|--------------|----------|-------------|---------------|
| a) wheel | b) bus | c) cupboard | d) house |
| e) face | f) eye | g) letter | h) moon |
| i) scissors | j) table | k) bed | l) eyeglasses |
| m) tree | n) chair | o) stairs | p) ear |
| q) container | r) book | s) flag | t) window |

3. Compound symbols

- a) cloth + table = tablecloth
- b) house + book = library
- c) feeling + down = sadness
- d) room + up + down = elevator
- e) water + down = rain
- f) house + car = garage
- g) container + water = bath, basin
- h) chair + wheel = wheelchair
- i) room + bath = bathroom

4. Pointers

- | | | |
|----------|------------|------------|
| a) floor | b) wall | c) ceiling |
| d) hip | e) heel | f) foot |
| g) chest | h) stomach | i) trunk |

5. Indicators

- a) went (addition of past action indicator)
- b) books (addition of plural indicator)
- c) (to) hear or (to) listen (addition of action indicator)
- d) boys (addition of plural indicator)
- e) saw (addition of past action indicator)
- f) (to) fill (substitution of action indicator for description indicator)
- g) rain (removal of description indicator)

6. One symbol: many meanings

Listed below are only two possible correct answers for each symbol. Other words would also be appropriate, as long as they are related to the meaning represented by the symbol.

- | | |
|------------------|----------------|
| a) 1. attractive | d) 1. to speak |
| 2. pretty | 2. to talk |
| b) 1. lounge | e) 1. to look |
| 2. sitting room | 2. to watch |
| c) 1. huge | |
| 2. large | |

(Expanding Symbol Vocabulary)

1. The Combine Indicator

- | | |
|----------------|------------------------|
| a) snowmobile | c) electric wheelchair |
| b) hearing aid | d) x-ray |

2. Opposite Meaning Symbol

- | | |
|---------|----------------|
| a) easy | c) to remember |
| b) hate | d) cold |

3. Letters of the Alphabet

This answer will vary, depending upon the persons in your family. An example would be $\hat{\Delta}_2$ — Mary is the sister's name.

Chapter 3

Who Uses Blissymbolics?

1. The correct answer is b). Mark could not learn to speak because the muscles used for talking did not move properly. His attempts at sound and word production were not understood. In Mark's case, this was a result of his cerebral palsy. It is important to remember that most children who have cerebral palsy do learn to speak.
2. The correct answer is d). The muscles used for talking are called the muscles of articulation-phonation-respiration. This includes muscles that move the lips, tongue, soft palate, vocal cords, and lungs.
3. The correct answer is d). Mental retardation, deafness, and emotional disorders can affect the intellectual, hearing, and emotional systems that support speech and language development.
4. The correct answer is c). In some cases, the introduction of Blissymbolics may remove the pressure to speak because the child

has another way to express himself. As he relaxes, the speech muscles may work in a more co-ordinated manner. Smoother, more co-ordinated movement of the speech muscles may make speech more intelligible.

5. The correct answer is a). Long-term teaching goals vary with each child, his family, and the situation. Teaching strategies developed at the time of the initial assessment may change as the symbol instructor obtains more information about the child and his environment.

Chapter 4

The Blissymbol Display

1. The correct answer is b). The words “symbol display” and “symbol board” are often used interchangeably. Symbol displays can and do vary from child to child, or for one child over time as his needs change. Standard displays and stamp and grid systems are only types of symbol displays.
2. The correct answer is c). Standard displays contained 100, 200 or 400 symbols. It was found that these standard displays were not always compatible with the needs of individual children.
3. The correct answer is e). The child must be able to see and discriminate among the symbol shapes, access his symbol vocabulary, and have a knowledge of the meaning of symbols and their organization on the display for communication purposes.
4. The correct answer is b). The organization shown in the display example is based on meaning and grammatical categories. For example, all things (nouns) are grouped together at the right side of the display. This assists the building of symbol sentences that follow English grammar.
5. The correct answer is c). Designing a display takes time, and often many trials are needed before a display design is found that works. The child should start using symbols as soon as he shows an interest in them. As he uses them, further information can be gained that will help the symbol instructor choose the best layout.

Chapter 5

Special Equipment

1. The correct answer is c). The symbol display and vocabulary are essential for symbol communication and are not part of support systems.
2. The correct answer is c). A chair that provides support for the child’s body will facilitate better control of muscle movements.

This will promote better targeting skills for Blissymbol communication. However, communication with symbols should not be restricted to the occasions when the child is properly seated.

3. The correct answer is e). An interface is equipment that comes between the child and symbol display to help channel uncontrolled movements into more controlled and accurate movements for symbol selection.
4. The correct answer is a). Support systems are often unreliable. Their use should not be encouraged when the symbol user no longer requires them, or when the display design can be altered to allow direct selection of the symbol vocabulary.

Chapter 6

How Can I Help?

1. The correct answer is a). Opportunities for communication should be part of your child's daily routine from the beginning of Blissymbol instruction.
2. The correct answer is b). Modelling is a term used in many teaching situations. It starts with the child's output and expands upon it, thereby helping the child to master the next stage of development. The model might not reflect adult grammar, if in fact the child is at an early stage of language learning.
3. The correct answer is e). Integration of symbols skills refers to the use of Blissymbolics in all those situations where communication would be normally expected. The symbol message may be more or less precise depending upon the child's mastery of Blissymbolics.
4. The correct answer is d). As the name implies, total communication refers to all the actions that enhance the meaning expressed. This includes facial expression, body movement, vocalization, and the use of symbols.
5. The correct answer is d). The inventive symbol user is able to expand his available symbol vocabulary in order to express a wider range of meanings.
6. Refer to the end of Chapter 6 for the list of the thirteen principles.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS USED IN THE TEXT

- access:** refers to the ability to reach a desired target. In Blissymbol communication, access refers to the means that the symbol user has to reach a symbol on his display.
- articulation:** the production of speech sounds, performed largely through the movements of the lips, tongue, soft palate, and lower jaw.
- Blissymbol:** a graphic design that has meaning, as defined by the creator of the system, Charles Bliss, or by the Blissymbolics Communication Institute. (Charles Bliss' concept envisages an international communication system; the BCI's concept is adaptive for use by the handicapped.)
- Blissymbolics:** Blissymbols and the principles that govern their use as a communication system.
- Blissymbol element:** one of approximately 100 basic Blissymbols. A symbol element has meaning; it can be used alone or as a building block in the creation of new meanings.
- cerebral palsy:** the condition of paralysis or lack of motor co-ordination caused by damage to the brain centres controlling muscle sensation and movement.
- communication:** the process of sending ideas, thoughts, feelings, or opinions either consciously or unconsciously. Communication can occur through gestural, vocal, speech, or non-vocal means.
- compound Blissymbol:** a symbol expression composed of two or more meaning components.
- concept:** an idea or image that the individual has about the world and events around him.
- deaf:** refers to a loss of all usable hearing; whereas, hard-of-hearing indicates a degree of hearing at some level.
- grammar:** the conventional ordering and arrangement of words or symbols to convey precise meanings.
- graphic:** refers to the visual display of information.
- ideographic symbols:** Blissymbols that suggest an idea rather than conveying it directly.

- intelligible:** refers to the clarity of the speech production that allows speech to be understood by others.
- language:** any conventional and formalized system, either vocal or other, for communicating ideas and thoughts. Oral language and written language are examples of a formalized system. The understanding of language is called *receptive language*; whereas, the use or production of language is referred to as *expressive language*.
- motor-speech disorders:** deviations of speech output caused by impairment (often physiological) of the muscles used for speech production.
- mental retardation:** a condition in which the prime feature is general intellectual impairment originating in the developmental period. Developmental milestones are delayed.
- occupational therapist:** a person trained to assess and treat problems of a sensory-motor nature that prevent the adequate functioning of the individual in the home, school, or work setting.
- phonation:** refers to the production of sound (voice) by the vibration of the vocal cords.
- physiotherapist:** a person trained to assess and treat problems of movement in children and adults.
- pictographic symbols:** Blissymbol drawings that resemble the object they represent.
- pointer:** a device to indicate or point out a specific area within a larger area. In the discussion of Blissymbolics, a pointer can refer to the arrow used to highlight part of a symbol to convey a new meaning, or it can refer to equipment such as a headstick or hand pointer which assists the symbol user to select a specific symbol from those on his display.
- respiration:** act of breathing. Breathing for speech requires alterations of the normal respiration cycle, for which a greater degree of respiratory control is needed.
- speech:** refers to articulation.
- speech therapist:** a person trained to assess and treat all aspects of communication defects and disorders (also called a speech pathologist).
- spelling board:** a display containing the letters of the alphabet, which the non-speaking person uses for communication by spelling each word for his listener.
- stroke:** a medical condition of sudden onset in which lack of oxygen to the brain may leave permanent damage to movement, language, and intellect.

symbol: a form, either visual or acoustic, that has meaning.

symbol display: the continuing organization of Blissymbols on a surface, for the purpose of communication (also called a *symbol board*).

template: stencil of shapes used for accurate drawing of Blissymbols.

word list: a list of words printed or written for the non-speaking person to use as his expressive vocabulary.

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Leesa Oworm is a Speech Pathology graduate from the University of Toronto. Her interest in Blissymbolics and its application with physically disabled children began during her employment at the Credit Valley Treatment Centre for Children in the fall of 1978. It was here that she met children and teens who were successfully using Blissymbols to communicate, even though they had no intelligible speech. Since then, Miss Oworm has been an active member of a multidisciplinary team responsible for assessment and treatment of children requiring augmentative communication systems.

Although Miss Oworm is a strong advocate of therapeutic management and intervention, she feels that it is ultimately those persons in daily contact with the child who can best encourage the spontaneous interchange of ideas and feelings using the Blissymbol system.



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